

# Seeking the Nature of Idioms: A Socio-Cultural Study in Idiomatic English and Arabic meanings

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**Abstract-** Idioms are part and parcel of mastering any language. They are a prominent natural part of our everyday discourse since they reflect cultural and linguistic boundaries enabling communication between different cultures. This paper, therefore, attempts to explore the different types of idiom, shed lights on some Arabic and English idioms and focus on the difficulties faced by learners and translators. Bearing in mind these aims, some Arabic and English idioms were selected and then explained. The overall results showed that idioms can never be translated literally; context, equivalence and semantic relativism should be considered when dealing with idioms. To be communicatively and linguistically competent, translators as well as learners should find the equivalence in the same language first and then in the target language. As a result, it is strongly recommended that translators as well as learners should be fully aware of some translation techniques and the context of the discourse s/he is dealing with.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Richards and Schmidt (2002: 246) defines an idiom as: " an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts." For example, the meaning of the idiom to "run oneself out" is "to be completely exhausted". This meaning has nothing to do with the meanings of the separate words of which the idiom is composed. However, it is to be noted that an idiom has usually started as a phrase having a literal meaning and then starts to be used in a figurative way. Al-Haddad (1994) argues that there must be some relationship between the meaning of most idioms and the meanings of their constituents at some time in the past, and, if not, they would not have been expressed by them. Translating idioms is not an easy task. Pedersen (in Trosborg, 1997: 109) argues that: " The translation of idioms is as difficult as it is central". Whereas Larson (1984), argues that idioms should be translated with great care:" The translator must first be sure of the meaning of the idiom and then look for the natural equivalent word to express the meaning of the idiom as a whole".

Despite recent developments in the field of translation theory and application, idiomatic expressions are still considered as a serious challenge for translators as well as foreign teachers/learners . Many scholars like Newmark (1988), Larson (1984) confirmed that idioms can never be translated literally; word for word translation should be avoided.

## II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The current paper is to analyze some Arabic and English idioms taking into consideration their bound culture, equivalence and context, to explore the types of idioms, and to focus on using one of the techniques of dealing with idioms that is equivalence.

## III. OBSERVATIONS

In this section, Arabic idioms will be translated literally; word for word translation will be conducted in order to obviously show the research problem and to be a basis for the results and discussion in the following section.

	<i>Arabic idioms</i>	<i>Word for word translation into English</i>
1	beddak elhaq walla ibin ammoh?	DO YOU WANT THE TRUTH OR ITS COUSIN?
2	ilak or walla lil theeb?	FOR YOU OR FOR THE WOLF?
3	bagool toar begool ihliboh	I TELL HIM IT'S A BULL, HE SAYS MILK IT.
4	abaad min nijoom elsama	FARTHER THAN THE STARS IN THE SKY
5	arkhasu mina al fjl	CHEAPER THAN RUDDISH
6	gassdak itha ajat elmalaeka, alshayyateen raht	DO YOU MEAN WHEN ANGELS COME, DEVILS RUN AWAY?
7	hal mustaed an taddaa rasak bain elroos wetgool ya gattaa elroos	ARE YOU READY TO PUT YOUR HEAD AMONG THESE HEADS AND SHOUT CUT OUR HEADS OFF?
8	hal elain bi teala an elhajeb?!	CAN THE EYE BECOME HGHER THAN THE EYEBROW?!

**Table A**

As shown in Table A, the translation of the selected idioms seems to be meaningless though idioms are very meaningful in Arabic. For more specific illustration, let's consider the eighth example tackled in Table A. on the one hand when a speaker of Arabic uses such idiom " Can the eye become higher than the eyebrow?", s/he intends to refers to a noble person to show that s/he has the most sublime status.

A hearer of another culture may get this message wrongly; s/he may understand that the speaker is looking for illogical scientific information?

#### IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Though, idioms are used interchangeably in both speaking and writing, we should consider that spoken Arabic generally uses idioms more often than written. Moreover, there are regular idioms and there are special idioms in terms of structure or meaning. Those of special structure are the dialogue expressions, the narrative expressions and the rhetorical questions.

##### 4.1 Dialogue expressions:

As regards the dialogue expressions, formulaic responses are required. This can be clearly shown in the following examples: first, as shown in **Table A** in the first example, when a speaker of Arabic intends to confirm s/he is telling the truth, s/he sometimes starts the conversation with the following question: ( beddak elhaq walla ibin ammoh?) a word for word translation for this question is ( do you want the truth or its cousin?). the listener should reply ( I want the truth of course). Second as shown in **table A** in the second example, when a speaker of Arabic asks a friend to do him/her a favor, he uses a provocative expression like ( ilak or walla lil theebe?) which means in English . “FOR YOU OR FOR THE WOLF?”. As a result, the listener should reply saying (khasa eltheeb) which means in English “WOE TO THE WOLF”. This reply shows that the listener is willing to help. Third, when a speaker

##### 4.2 Narrative expressions

Concerning the narrative expressions, it is worth notably that a narrative expression consists of two to four sentences to make a certain point. This can be clearly shown in the following examples; first as shown in table A, the third example, a speaker of Arabic usually says (bagoool toar begoool ihliboh) a word for word translation for this sentence is (I tell him it’s a bull, he says milk it). The speaker indeed intends to confirm that the listener doesn’t understand what the speaker means. To enhance this idea, a further example can be discussed: In a badly frustrating situation, especially when a speaker of Arabic intends to argue that s/he is telling the truth and that s/he is not a liar, s/he you starts his/her argument wishing to disappear from existence if s/he was a liar!.( inshallah I will be vanished from the surface of earth). After hearing such type of a sentence, the listener is expected to believe what the speaker argues about.

Third as shown in table A, the fourth example, a phrase like (abaad min nijoom elsama) which means “FARTHER THAN THE STARS IN THE SKY”. This phrase can be used to describe something that is absolutely impossible. To enhance this idea, a similar example can be discussed: a phrase like (ath-haru mina alshamsi) which means ( as clear as the sun), can be used to show that a speaker’s point of view is completely clear and obvious. A similar example on narrative expressions is shown in table A, 5: when a speaker of Arabic intends to convey that something is much more cheaper that you think. He says “arkhasu mina al fiji” which means in English ( CHEAPER THAN RUDDISH).

To support this idea, another example of narrative expressions is to be discussed: when a speaker of Arabic wants to convey that nothing is impossible for him/her, s/he can say ( itha betotlob laban elasfoor, hajeeboh) which means in English ( even if you ask me for the milk of a bird, I’ll bring it). Similarly, if a speaker of Arabic intends to praise someone showing that s/he is of good origin, or that s/he a respectable person, the speaker says (ibin “or bint” ajaweed) which means in English “SON OF ADAM (A HUMAN BEING)”.

##### 4.3 Rhetorical Questions

This type of idiomatic questions indeed needs no answer. As shown in table A, 6, a speaker of Arabic can use a funny expression when someone on the way out meets someone else coming in. a speaker of Arabic says (gassdak itha ajat elmalaeka, alshayyateen raht) which means in English "DO YOU MEAN WHEN ANGELS COME, DEVILS RUN AWAY?". In such a funny situations, only smiles are expected from the addressees. Similarly, if a person is complaining about a certain matter, a speaker of Arabic may ask, as a means of calming down that addressee (hal mustaed an taddaa rasak bain elroos wetgool ya gattaa elroos) a word for word translation, this question can be translated in English to (are you ready to put your head between these heads and shout cut our heads off. Meaning "Would you do whatever anyone else is doing even if it means your life?" (like the English proverb if your friend jumped from a bridge would you?).

As a means of pointing out this idea, let’s discuss the following example shown in table A, 8: When a person of a noble origin is insulted by a trivial or bad person , a speaker of Arabic may ask (hal elain bi teala an elhajeb?!) which can be translated into English as (can the eye become higher than the eyebrow?!). the eye here refers to that noble person to show that he has the most sublime status.

##### 4.4 How can translators or learners overcome this problem

Idioms have been formed as a result of cultural and social backgrounds, and therefore come into use on certain occasions. Translators as well as learners should take into their account the idioms equivalence and the context those idioms have been used in the same language and then later on in English translation and vice versa. The following table shows some Arabic idioms and their equivalences in English.

	Arabic idioms	English equivalences
1	من تفتق لسلامو عليكم min tagtag la salmu alaikom. (from the beginning to saying bye)	from A to Z
2	يملئ العين yomalli alain (to fill the eye )	To fill the bill
3	اطلع من نافوخي tlaa min nafookhi “get out my brain”	get off my back
4	يشم الخبر yashommo alkhavar “to smell the news”	get wind of
5	طلع عينه tallaa ainoh (to get his eye out)	give someone a hard time
6	أقطع ذراعي diraay agtaa (I will cut	I will eat my hat if

	my arm if)	
7	حايطة مايلا haita mayla “a falling wall”	a broken reed
8	عاشم ابلبس في الجنة asham ibleess fi aljannah (it’s the devil’s wish to join the paradise)	A pie in the sky
9	ماييا مين تحت تين mayya min that tibun (water under dried grass)	a snake in the grass
10	فولة وانقسمت نصين itgasamet nossain. (one pea divided into two parts)	two peas in a pod

**Table B**

English idioms	equivalence in arabic
He is a black sheep (used to mean someone is ill-mannered)	شخص سيء He is ill-mannered
it's a apiece of cake ( used to show it is an easy matter)	الموضوع مية (it's water)
It rains dogs and cats. (used to show that it rains heavily)	الدنيا بتكبس (it is pressing much)
This is a hot air (used to mean those words are valueless).	هل سمعتم شي ؟ anything?
She is in the clouds. (referes to a person who is absent-minded).	مش معنا she isn't with us
Break the ice is used to mean “pave the way”	افتح مجال open a field
I will go banana is used to mea (I will go mad ).	مخي حيطير (my brain will fly)
He looks blue is used to mean (he is sad).	مسكرة معه (it's closed to him)

**Table C**

## V. CONCLUSION

Idioms are culture-bound; the majority of idioms have cultural associations, which make them peculiar. Accordingly, translators as well as learners should adopt a strategy when dealing with idioms; both form and meaning should be considered. Regarding idioms translation, idioms can never be literally translated. Accordingly, translators as well as learners should pay attention to the context and the equivalence of a certain idiom.

Compared to idioms, simple words like “open”, “lion”, “teacher” etc can be easily translated. When dealing with idioms, a translator as well as a learner should find the equivalence in the same language first and then in the target language. As a result, it is strongly recommended that should be fully aware of the translation techniques and the context of the discourse s/he is dealing with.

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